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ABSTRACT

Attribution theory and gerontology would be enriched by the application of a life-span approach to attribution, involving increased attention to the age of the stimulus person and developmental factors associated with self-attribution. In studies on achievement attributions about older people, chronological age appears to be a more salient cue for failure than for success, but findings in this area may be task-dependent. Research on attributions made by older persons indicates that older respondents do not use information about past history when making attributional judgments. This may be due to a cognitive difference in the ability to process multiple sources of information, but a clear conclusion cannot be made on the basis of present research. Recent investigations involving immediate attributions by older persons about their own intellectual behavior offer promising approaches to uncovering information about self-serving biases and attributional judgments which are appropriate to older persons. Practical implications of attributional research include attribution therapy for older persons with self-debilitating attributions, changing attributions which perpetuate negative stereotypes about older people, and examining the attributional correlates of personal control in institutionalized older people. (Author/NRB)

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# The Life-Span Perspective and Attribution Theory

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## Abstract

This paper reviews some of the recent research on attribution theory and aging. First, studies on achievement attributions about older people are discussed. These include investigations in which respondents were asked to indicate the relative importance of the Weiner attributions of ability, task difficulty, effort, and luck for the achievement outcomes of older, as compared to younger stimulus persons. The notion of chronological age itself in the context of the Weiner attributions is summarized as important for the failure of older persons, but findings may be task-dependent in this area; there may be some tasks, such as experience-related activities for which old age is associated with success. Secondly, this paper examines the issue of attributions by older persons. Some research indicates that older respondents do not utilize information about past history when making attributional judgments. This may be due to a cognitive difference in the ability to process multiple sources of information, but a clear conclusion on this issue cannot be made on the basis of research done to date. Recent investigations involving immediate attributions by older persons about their own intelectual behavior are described as promising approaches to uncovering information about self-serving biases and attributional judgments which are appropriate to older persons. Finally some practical implications of attributional research are suggested, such as attribution therapy for older people with self-debilitating attributions, changing attributions which perpetuate negative stereotypes about older people, changing depressogenic attributions in line with the reformulated model of learned helplessness, and examining the attributional correlates of personal control in institutionalized older people.


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The Life-Span Perspective and Attribution Theory

A survey of the texts in introductory gerontology and of the professional journals in aging would reveal that gerontologists, in a rather idealistic and cavalier fashion, make the assertion that gerontology is a truly inter-disciplinary enterprise incorporating methods and findings from psychology, sociology, biology and other disciplines. For example, the Journal of Gerontology is described as a periodical which publishes scientific articles on the biological, clinical, psychological, and social aspects of aging Huyck & Hoyer, 1982). A survey of gerontological research and psychological research would reveal, however, a more parochial state of affairs -- namely that psychology, including social psychology, too often pursues its own theoretical agenda, and gerontology too often travels on the well-worn path initially paved by developmental psychologists, who have been interested in characteristics of intellectual decline in old age, and by sociologists who have studied demographic and institutional aspects of aging. The general purpose of this symposium is to digress momentarily from these well-worn paths and to examine the connection between social psychology (both the sociological and psychological versions) and gerontology. The particular purposes of this paper are to review the tentative conclusions of the few studies which have been conducted on attribution theory, one of the most active areas of psychological social psychology, and aging and to make some recommendations for future research and application on using a more life-span perspective than has previously been the case in attribution research.

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Attributions about older people and by older people are part of common parlance but not yet a significant part of social psychological research. Young and middle-aged adults are frequently heard saying, "She can't do that <u>because</u> she's too old;" and poets are heard echoing these implicit age attributions:

> It is age which gives largess of crumbs to the pigeons,
> The wintered people, whom life with an ultimate shove,
> Thrusts to the park bench. Too late for deeds or love:
> It is the old who must give what they have,--to a dove
>
> Julia Cooley Altrocchi

The issue of attributing behavior to old age itself and ascribing failure in older people to loss of ability are issues critical to the attribution theorist and applied social psychologist, but unfortunately precious little testing of attribution theory or application of its principles has involved older people -- either as target persons or as subjects. The message in this essay is aimed at social psychologists who study attribution theory and its applications; the essence of the message is that both attribution theory and gerontology would be enriched by the application of a life-span approach to attribution, involving increased attention to age of stimulus person and developmental factors associated with self-attribution. These objectives will be pursued by examining the following research issues: (1) achievement attributions about older people and chronological age as an attributional source; (2) achievement attributions by older people; (3) practical implications, such as modification of maladaptive attributions processes in older people.

A life-span perspective is an important broadening and enriching strategy



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for any topic of social psychology, as Blank (1982) has pointed out, but especially for attribution theory. First of all, most studies of attribution theory have ignored the dimension of age of stimulus person, and yet the fairly robust and oft-cited Weiner model of attribution offers a compelling theoretical context within which to introduce the dimension of age as an attributional source of stimulus persons. Secondly, attributions of one's own behavior for people of different ages offers some unique challenges and questions to social and developmental psychologists: for example, how important are birth-cohort differences in one's tendency to use various attributions for success and failure? Do cognitive changes with age affect people's tendency to use past performance as information in forming attributions? Would older people, as attitude research suggests, use age attribution less in explaining their behavior than young people would use in explaining older persons' behavior? Some social psychological gerontologists have begun to examine attribution of the achievement outcomes of older people, but, unfortunately, most of the time respondents in these studies have been younger people. A life-span approach demands considerably more conclusions about older respondents than are presently available.

The recent volume by Blank (1982) is the only book to this date which focuses upon a life-span perspective from the standpoint of the "psychological" social psychologist. By the latter term I am referring to the regrettable dichotomy on the topic of social psychology between sociologists and psychologists which has been noted and commented on by several others (Cartwright, 1979; House, 1977; Stryker, 1977). Blank (1982) has made a strong attempt to integrate psychological social psychology and sociological



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social psychology in the context of aging, and Tedeschi (1980) too has offered an integration through the issues of aggression, altruism, attraction and reactance. The unavoidable truth about attribution, however, is that so far it has remained largely within the purview of the psychological social psychologists. Perhaps further attempts at integrating the two social psychologies, especially in the life-span context where sociologists have been more active than psychologists, will provide new challenges and developments for attribution theory.

As noted by Blank (1982), attribution theory has suffered from limitations of target person types and subjects, and this has resulted in the rather circumscribed "snapshot social psychology" of and about college students. Using older persons as target persons would seem to be a convenient starting point for the application of attribution theory to a life-span perspective, and, in fact, a few exploratory investigations of this type have been done.

## Older Persons as Targets in Attributional Research

Studies involving older persons as targets have usually utilized some form of achievement task which provides the basis for explanations of the performances of older people, as compared with those of younger people. One series of studies by Connor and Walsh used a job-interview situation (Connor, Walsh, Litzelman, & Alvarez, 1978; Locke-Connor & Walsh, 1980) and the evaluation of an essay (Walsh & Connor, 1979) where college student Ss were doing the evaluating. In the job-interview setting they found: (a) age was of relatively little importance in evaluating the interview performance of females (Connor et al., 1978); (b) demographic factors (external, stable) were used more to explain the failures of the old than



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the failures of the young (Locke-Connor & Walsh, 1980). In the essay evaluation (Walsh & Connor, 1979) an interaction between sex and age was found, such that evaluations of the performances of young females and old males were negatively rated.

Reno (1979) examined the attributions for success and failure of an old stimulus person who applied to college, as compared with those made for a young stimulus person, within the context of Weiner's attribution model. In his early formulation of achievement motivation, Weiner (1972, 1974) postulated that, on a stability dimension, ability and task difficulty are stable attributional sources while effort and luck are unstable. In addition he initially postulated a locus-of-control dimension of internality versus externality. (In a recent reformulation of these concepts, Weiner [1979] reviewed the empirical evidence that supports the stability dimension as a distinctive attribution pattern but questions the locus-of-control dimension.) In achievement situations expected outcomes are usually attributed to stable causes and unexpected outcomes to unstable causes (Deaux, 1976; Frieze & Weiner, 1971). Reno found that failure on the part of the old stimulus person (a presumed expected outcome) was attributed more to stable causes of lack of ability and task difficulty, while a young man's failure (a presumed unexpected outcome) was attributed to the unstable cause of lack of effort. No differences as a function of age of stimulus person, however, occurred in attributions of success or expectancy of success.

Chronological age (i.e., old age), therefore, appears to be a more salient cue for failure than for success; this result seems consistent with those reported in the attribution study by Banziger and Drevenstedt (1982), which will be discussed below.

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It should be noted that in Reno's study only young respondents were utilized and, therefore, no indications of the attributions of old observers could be obtained. A related study by Sherman, Gold, and Sherman (1978) reported that unexpectedly active older men were very positively evaluated by older and younger judges and that attributions of the behavior of these target persons were consistent with those of attribution theory; that is, the unexpected success of an older person was probably attributed to effort which has been found to magnify affect and evaluation (Weiner, Russell & Lerman, 1978).

Smith (1981) in an unpublished study examined attributions of outcomes by college-aged Ss for a speed-related task (presumably advantageous for the young) and for an experience-related task (presumably advantageous for the old). Again, consistent with other attributional research (Feather & Simon, 1971: Feldman-Summers & Kiesler, 1974), the unexpected outcome (e.g., success of an older person on a speed-related task) was attributed more to the unstable causation of effort than was the expected outcome.

Although this beginning of the integration of attribution theory and aging has been achieved by examining how older target persons are viewed when outcomes are unexpected, there has not been a great deal of attention to the question of how the atrributional source of chronological age itself is regarded.

Ranziger and Drevenstedt (1982) have recently tested directly the salience of age as a perceived differential causal attribution for the success and failure of an old versus young stimulus person. In addition an attempt was made to examine underlying attributional dimensions that might be subsumed under the rubric of age. In two experiments they hypothesized that age



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would be used as a causal attribution of considerable potency when attempting to explain the failure of an older person as compared to the failure of a younger person. On the other hand, age would not be a differential factor in the attributions of success outcomes. Whereas negative stereotypes of old age would account for an age attribution of failure (an expected outcome) for the older performer, in the case of success outcome observers would not perceive age as an important attribution in differentiating older and younger actors. Results from two achievement tasks used in this study yielded consistent evidence, across tasks and samples of judges, that age was more strongly endorsed for the failure of the older than of the younger performers. Unexpectedly, however, age was also more strongly endorsed for the success of the younger than of the older person. The interaction effect of stimulus age by outcome was found to be significant only for the age attribution, not for any of the Weiner-model attributions. The only relationship between endorsement of age and ability attributions, across success-failure outcomes, was found for the old stimulus person engaged in the academic course examination. (See Banziger and Drevenstedt [1982] for complete details of experiments.)

A major conclusion of this study was that knowledge of the age of a stimulus person does sensitize observers to the causal attribution of old age when an older person is seen as failing at a task, and of youth when a younger person is seen as succeeding. It is important to note that these differences in age attribution occurred even though each S in the experiment rated either a young or old stimulus person, not a comparison of both.

Overall, these studies point to at least two common conclusions

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regarding differential attributions about young versus old target persons: (a) the importance of age as a variable mediating attributions for failures as opposed to successes; (b) the variation of attribution for an older stimulus person as a function of the specific task being performed. The issue of task specificity raises the question of whether older people are expected to fail at tasks associated with college, e.g., applications, tests, and to succeed at other tasks, such as making judgments of people's character or resolving interpersonal conflicts, where experience may be more important. Much less is known about this latter aspect, i.e., the success expectation, than is known about failure.

Because age is such a commonly used social index, ready ascription of causation simply to age would suggest far-reaching implications. In all probability such outcomes would be seen as inevitable and probably as generalizable events with non-remediable consequences (i.e., one cannot change what is caused by "old age", and one is old across situations). Even Heider (1958) in discussing the concept of "can" suggested that age (presumably young as well as old) has ability-attribution connections. Inasmuch as attitudes toward old age have been shown to be multi-dimensional (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969), an ascription of failure to the performer's age might be hypothesized to reflect not only perceived lack of ability but perhaps other negative connotations of old age, the perceptions varying as a function of specific task demands. The past research mentioned above would suggest this asymmetrical hypothesis, i.e., old age signifies failure but youth may not necessarily signify success.

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## Task Specificity

It would be informative to be able to generalize these conclusions to a wider variety of tasks than those used in current studies. Other studies have indicated that attributions vary with task demands, and age might also as an attributional source which varies with the task at hand.
be demonstrated. For example, as Smith's (1981) findings suggest, on tasks perceived as requiring greater experience, the reverse effect might be found, whereby a young person's failure and an old person's success would be attributed, respectively, to age. A recent unpublished study has shed some light on this notion of a "reverse effect". In a vignette-description format of observer attribution patterned after the Banziger and Drevenstedt study it was found that young respondents attributed success but not failure of an older (as compared to a younger) physician, who had prescribed a certain treatment, to effort and ability (Wolf, Moore, & Banziger, 1982). Taken in the context of the previous study, this attribution to internal sources for success suggests that when age is a cue in a stimulus person, attributions are quite task-dependant. Age attributions might also vary for non-achievement situations, i.e., tasks other than academic or work-related. For example, age might be perceived as a reason for success in a social situation where skills of diplomacy and verbal fluency would be important, such as hosting a visitor from a foreign country or helping people to resolve a personal conflict.

The question of task-dependant findings in this line of research also arises in the potential relationships between age and the Weiner attributional sources. In these two experiments age was significantly related to ability (and no other attributions) on the more intellectual academic-examination task, but there was no consistent association in



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accounting for performance on the written driver-license task. Future investigations might explore whether ability and age are associated in explaining outcomes of tasks perceived as making difficult intellectual demands, but not necessarily associated in tasks implying other skills, such as the driver-license test. Perhaps observers associate age and ability only with a circumscribed type of tasks, such as ones where verbal, integrative and judgmental processes are involved. This may help to explain society's expectation of success for older people in the role of sage (i.e., old and able) and the contrasting expectation of failure for older people in the role of student driver (i.e., age alone may be a sufficient cause [see Kun & Weiner, 1973] for failure).

The theoretical question about where chronological age fits into the Weiner paradigm (stability, locus of control and controllability) has only been superficially answered by attribution experiments to this date. Although age attribution may be moderately related to ability attribution in some situations, such as intellectual tasks, chronological age can have unique explanatory connotations, at least within the framework of the Weiner model. Intuitively, age would seem to be perceived as internal, stable, and uncontrollable, but evidence on a variety of task situations needs to be provided in order to demonstrate its theoretical fit.

## Older Persons as Judges in Achievement Attributions

Most of the research cited to this point has used as subjects college students. A life-span perspective, of course, would demand broader sampling but also controls for social class and educational level which are often confounded with birth cohorts. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the theoretical questions are more compelling and the answers are more limited in the case of older persons as attributional judges, due to the dearth



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of research, than they are in the case of older people as stimulus persons. Ideally longitudinal studies of attributional changes should be conducted, but these are time-consuming and expensive. Although Banziger and Drevenstedt used a sample of primarily middle-class older women in one of their experiments, no controls for educational level or cognitive ability were applied. It is important to note that this aspect of the study still involved older persons making judgments about the outcomes of other stimulus persons, sometimes an older person and sometimes a younger person. They reported some evidence suggesting that there is a more restricted range of information used in attributions of their older judges, inasmuch as the causal judgments of the older judges were influenced by the immediate outcomes but not by performance history. By contrast, performance consistency, in this case an interaction of history and outcome, influenced the judgments of young respondents. It would be interesting for future research to explore whether highly educated and/or verbal older judges tend to weigh the same factors in reaching attributional decisions as do young college-educated subjects and whether any such differences which might be found would be related to age or to birth-cohort. Rabbit and Vyas (1980), in their research on future expectancies, suggested that older people use a restricted sampling of information in making judgments, remembering, analyzing, and employing smaller samples of the recent past when they are computing what is most likely to occur next. As is often the case in developmental research, cohort effects, such as those of the educational level, need to be separated from potential effects of aging in seeking answers to this question. If this is so or if it is true that older people utilize a more restricted set of information in making cognitive judgments, then this should be evident

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in measures of attribution; that is, older judges would probably pay more attention to outcome factors rather than to prior history of a target person and probably would be less likely to change attributional judgments when abstract, non-superficial cues of the stimulus person are modified. The results from the older sample of the Banziger and Drevenstedt study suggest that older people are utilizing more immediate information than younger judges when they make attributions, but this difference may be quite likely due to cohort variation. Differences in schooling and experience with written questions may be the major reasons why younger people seem to consider more information when making attributions. Again, good longitudinal or cross-sequential experimental designs result in better conclusions about these questions than do cross-sectional studies. Nevertheless, this question is an apt example of an attribution hypothesis generated by a life-span perspective.

In her work on metacognition Lachman has recently offered a research paradigm which provides a unique opportunity for the integration of social psychology and gerontology. In this paradigm both older and younger adults are first given standardized tests of fluid and crystallized intelligence and are then asked to make predictions of future behavior and attributions about their recent performance. Using this approach Lachman and Jelalian (1984) found that both age groups showed the typical self-serving attributions, ascribing successful performance to ability and unsuccessful performance to task difficulty. A comparison, as Lachman and Jelalian tried to do, with the results of the Banziger and Drevenstedt study of the observer paradigm is not justified since the latter study found major differences on the attributional source of age (which can be either external or internal). Lachman's paradigm of asking respondents about their own immediately performed



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intellectual behavior is, however, a theoretically informative and practically useful approach. If we are truly interested in attributions which older people make about their own behavior, then we need to ask these people about their performance in several domains: 1) contrived laboratory tasks with which older people are less familiar, as Lachman and Jelalian did; 2) more naturalistic tasks with which they are familiar, such as solving interpersonal problems; and 3) tasks of functional intelligence, such as how to determine the cheapest price from an array of variously priced and packaged items in a grocery store. A further useful extension of this research would examine the long-term performance correlates of attribution of immediate performance; for example, would older respondents who attributed immediate successes to internal factors and immediate failures to external factors show more long-term adaptability to future stress and better performance on later tasks than those not making these "self-protective" attributions?

The implicit assumtion about self-protective attributions in social psychology is that such ascriptions are at best irrational interpretations of reality or at worst pathological distortions. In the case of older persons, however, for whom debilitating stereotypes are made by younger and other older persons, self-protective attributions of this nature would seem to be adaptive. That is, if an older person believed that he/she did poorly on a speeded test of visual-spatial skills (fluid intelligence) because of the difficulty of the task and that he/she did well on a verbal test because of ability, then this would serve to enhance self-esteem and life functioning.

## Practical Implications of Attribution Research in the Life-Span Perspective

### Attributions About Older People

The research by Banziger and Drevenstedt (1982) which was cited above



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has indicated that chronological age is a significant attribution in distinguishing achievement attributions of young versus old actors. This attributional tendency may be connected to the observed negative stereotypes which portray older people as helpless and incompetent. "Treatment" of these negative stereotypes should involve the traditional attitude-change techniques of social psychology (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977), but also the methods of modifying dispositional attributions to be situational. If a younger observer can be persuaded, for example, that an older person failed a driver-license test because of the difficulty of the test rather than because of her chronological age, expectations and treatment of the older person should improve. Some suggestions for change in this attribution tendency may be gleaned from studies by Bersheid, Graziano, Monson, and Dermer (1976) and by Newtson (1976): if young observers are led to believe that they will interact with an older person, they may like the person more (and make more situational attributions of their behavior), and if young observers are trained to break up the observed behavior of older persons into finer units, they may make more situational attributions. Furthermore, pursuant to Sanders' (1980) finding that behavior of acquaintances is attributed situationally, if observers could be convinced that the elderly are like acquaintances, then attributions to external factors (e.g., "she failed because the test was hard—just like what would have happened to me") might be increased. An applied social psychology would serve well by enhancing the salience of situational factors, especially when making attributions of failure in the elderly. It is no surprise that given the amount of age segregation which exists in our society, younger observers would utilize age stereotypes in making attributions about older actors. As long as



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individuating information about actors is at a minimum, observers will make category-based judgments (Jones & McGillis, 1976)—in this case attributions based on age stereotypes.

Kahana and Kiyak (see National Institute on Aging, 1983) have reported some work in which they relate the behavior of employees of nursing homes to those persons' treatment of older people. Those employees who held positive attitudes toward the elderly and toward their own aging were more likely to encourage independence in nursing home residents. It would be informative also to extend this work to examine the relationship between attributions made by such employees about the residents' behavior and their treatment of the residents. One would assume that those employees who attribute the successes of older residents to internal factors and failures to external factors would be likely to nurture more independence than those with the complementary attributions.

Attributions by Older People

A research question related to the treatment of older people with adjustment problems is how to modify attributional tendencies of an older actor. Sometimes dispositional attributions would be maladaptive, such as when an older person is over-attributing failure to the self, as suggested in a study on perceived responsibility for loneliness in the elderly (Moore & Schultz, 1982); other times situational attributions would be maladaptive such as when an older person is attributing success to external events. As Taylor and Fiske (1978) have pointed out, the salience of the self or the situation can be modified. If a dispositional attribution is maladaptive for an older person, then interventions to raise the salience of situational



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factors might be made with the elderly. By the same token maladaptive situational attributions might be shifted to dispositional ones with methods based on the findings of McArthur and Post (1977), e.g., enhancing the brightness of the actor, or by the video-taping methods of Storms (1973).

One might also turn around the scheme of the reformulated model of learned helplessness to encourage adaptive attributions in order to 1) counteract depression and 2) build perceived mastery/control, such as attributing failures to universal rather than to personal factors. In fact, Abramson et al. (1978) have offered some suggestions for a treatment strategy based on the reformulated model: (1) change the probability of outcomes; (2) make highly preferred outcomes less preferred; (3) change the expectation from helplessness to control; and (4) make failure external, unstable, and specific. Recommendation (3) has been applied to the situation of institutionalized aged with some promising results, as discussed below.

A theoretically interesting and potentially valuable therapeutic approach to the social psychology of older people has involved the notion of perceived control which will be mentioned here only in the context of attribution. In her recent book on the psychology of control Langer (1983) has reported evidence to demonstrate that helping the institutionalized elderly may result in self-induced dependence and reduce such persons' ability to perform tasks such as puzzle assembly. Presumably the helping response from outsiders leads to external, unstable, and specific attributions (as in the reformulated model of learned helplessness) of any success which the institutionalized elderly may experience, contributes to a long-term dependence and inability to cope, and prevents the elderly from "owning" responsibility for any gains



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they may experience.

As with any therapeutic relationship the critical question is how to intervene in the lives of people who have problems in such a way as to provide opportunities for independence and control. In the nursing home environment Rodin and Langer (1977), Shulz and Hanusa (1978) and Banziger and Roush (1982) have introduced some form of activity over which a resident may exert personal control (e.g., taking care of a plant, bird feeders, or predicting visiting hours) and a "responsibility" message. Results have shown short-term improvements in activity, nurses' ratings, and life satisfaction. So far Rodin and Langer have been the only ones to demonstrate enduring effects. The key to understanding the ability of this type of intervention to produce enduring effects may lie in an attributional explanation of the reformulated model of learned helplessness as described above: effective interventions give residents the opportunity to make internal, stable and global attributions of success. Unfortunately, these studies of control-relevant intervention have examined neither the attributions associated with perceived control nor changes in attribution that may accompany changes in perceived control. These studies also raise the related questions--What is the learning process which influences attribution-making? How does this learning process vary with age? The latter question is theoretically important as a developmental issue and of practical importance as an intervention issue.

At this point, however, I begin to digress in touching upon clinical psychology. Let this wait until next year's Gerontological Society Meeting when the title of the symposium will be "The Integration of Gerontology, Social Psychology, and Clinical Psychology!"

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